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Research Article

Strategies for Cultivating Positive Workplace Culture and Maximizing Workplace Learning and Assessment in Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET)

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ABSTRACT

The utilization of apprenticeships in Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET) has long been established, particularly in the field of engineering. However, a significant disparity exists between the workplace culture expectations of employers and students. A positive workplace culture plays a crucial role in cultivating a sense of pride and ownership among employees, and it is equally important to extend effective workplace culture support to competency-based apprentices. Such support not only fosters partnerships but also enhances practices that directly influence students' career development and occupation planning. These issues hold substantial interest for educators, policymakers, and institute communities. This paper critically examines current apprenticeship practices and emphasizes the significance of providing effective workplace culture support for students. Furthermore, it presents strategies that can contribute to institutes by promoting competency-based apprenticeships for workplace learning and assessment in VPET. By adopting these strategies, institutes can anticipate improved learning outcomes for apprentices in higher education.

Index Terms— Competency-Based, Workplace Culture, Workplace Learning and Assessment, Higher Education

I. INTRODUCTION

Workplace learning provides students with valuable opportunities to acquire practical experiences in real-world settings. However, a persistent disconnect often exists between the expectations of workplace providers and those of our students. Students frequently voice their concerns about how they are treated in the workplace, while some employers perceive our students to lack motivation and effective communication skills. Considering a previous job-matching experience we had, 15 initially successful placements were reduced to only 8 due to student resignations within the first few weeks (3 cases), unsuitability for the assigned work (2 cases), and reluctance to accept the offer (1 case). This example clearly demonstrates the prevalent mismatch between the expectations of our students and the workplace environment. Students express dissatisfaction with their treatment, and they often overlook their own weaknesses prior to starting their placements. This study explores the implications of this gap for employers, graduates, and educators, offering recommendations that can assist tertiary education providers in enhancing their support for students in the workplace.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Under Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET), Workplace Learning and Assessment (WLA) is a structured pedagogical approach newly initiated by the Vocational Training Council (VTC) in Hong Kong. WLA, where education is integrated into the work setting, enables the integration of the school-based

and work-based learning components in academic programmes, and becomes part of the curriculum requirement to enhance trainee learning motivation. Academic programmes can therefore keep abreast of the latest industry developments. Through the structured workplace assessment activities, employers can have a clear picture of the trainees' competence. The training activities can be fine-tuned based on the trainees' assessment results to enhance their performance.

Rainsbury et al. (2001) found the graduates already in the workforce were more likely to rank "hard" or more technical skills as more important than "soft" or non-technical skills. However, employers tend to look at apprenticeships as a productive resource with high level of soft skills. Upskilling and reskilling should be a practice that organization must invest in to upgrade its workforce and likewise, every individual must make use of learning opportunity to constantly evolve and gain capabilities. In engineering field, the most wanted Apprentice Skills (AS)can be summarized as the followings:

A. AS1. Applying Engineering Knowledge

- Apply knowledge and good practice
- Maintain engineering knowledge and skills

B. AS2. Developing Technical Solutions

- Define, investigate, design, develop solutions and analyze engineering problems

C. AS3. Managing Engineering Work

- Making decisions on part or all of one or more engineering activities
- Exercise sound professional engineering judgement

D. AS4. Upkeeping Professional Acumen

- Recognize ethical, social, cultural, health, safety, sustainability and environmental knowledge

Venables and Tan (2009) say that it is the responsibility of educational institutions to better prepare their graduates for entry into the work-place. On the other hand, Tomlinson (2007) believes that graduates are now aware that the transition from study to work is less easy than it may once have been.

WLA comes at a time when higher education institutes are urged to cope with changing demands from our emerging knowledge societies. Despite assessment being an important part of learning process, there is limited literature on workplace assessment due to a lack of recognition of learning that takes place in the workplace (Vaughan, 2009). Hager (2004) suggests that learning is inherently contextual and the main outcome of learning is the creation of a new set of relations in an environment. Concepts include Learning as Acquisition, Learning as Participation (Sfard, 1998), Learning as Co-construction (Felstead, et al., 2009), and Learning as Action (Tynjälä, 2008) feature practice-based and authentic learning that are often collaborative. Workplace learning is described as a process which is informal, incidental and practice-bound, based on experience, shaped by the work tasks and context in which the learning takes place, and is shared with internal and external work teams and communities (Collin, 2006 and Virtanen).

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The pandemic has principally changed the way the construction industry operates. It has caused a profound shift in how we conduct our work, with a large-scale take-up of remote working and changes in our digital approach. As we move forwards, this study investigates the following questions:

1. What specific strategies and recommendations can be implemented to effectively support and cultivate a positive workplace culture for competency-based apprentices?
2. How can the implementation of Workplace Learning and Assessment (WLA) practices bring about maximum benefits for both competency-based apprentices and the companies they are affiliated with?

IV. DISCUSSION

As we enter 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to impact our lives in many ways. From the mass adoption of the remote workforce and hybrid work models, digitalization and virtualization of events can be organized to accommodate the students' needs. To enhance students' abilities in workplace adaptation, workplace culture series can be organized to introduce different workplace cultures in various industries and workplace conflicts handling skills to students. The suggestion can be introduced in various industries so as to promote students' workplace adaptation and workplace conflicts handling skills. The following activities in workplace culture series can be organized.

A. Webinars to Inspire

Theme-based webinars to describe the importance of student engagement and the impact on students' learning outcomes about WLA such as sessions for employers to facilitate exchanges on best practices and expectations towards students, the dos and don'ts in the industry and how to communicate well between colleagues and supervisors etc. Professional development workshops for students by the industry sectors to boost students' understanding of WLA as well as the latest development and manpower trends of different trades and professions can also be provided. (control measure: communicate with the speakers to ensure that they understand the purposes of the sharing sessions and deliver content that incorporate our norms and

values).
In addition, sharing sessions by employers and graduates from different industries can be invited to talk about:

- the qualities standard of a good intern or fresh graduates
- the employers' expectations towards an intern or fresh graduates
- the effective communication between colleagues and supervisors
- real cases (both good and bad examples) sharing by graduates
- the dos and don'ts in the industry

To safeguard, control measures can be proposed to communicate with the speakers to ensure that they understand the purposes of the sharing sessions and deliver content that incorporate our norms and values.

B. Voice to You

The pandemic has principally changed the way industries operate. It has caused a profound shift in how we conduct our work, with a large-scale take-up of remote working and changes in our digital approach. The survey aims to investigate and understand if there is a difference between the skills that employers will be looking for, what those professionals think they will need, and how WLA can bring maximized benefits to the students. The survey will help support the student's transition into a post-pandemic world of work.
In order to enhance interaction, a capstone game with an aim to equip students with workplace survival skills through gamification can be designed. It is a board game that can be set up in any places including classrooms and outdoor. A focus group study can be conducted to collect comments from students. Constructive comments and encouraging feedbacks can be received. During the workplace culture series implementation, students can play the capstone game at a game booth, and/or at a larger scale, on the amphitheatre or basketball courts in teams.

C. Virtual Site Visit

Engaging VR 3D scanning service in different workplaces, this virtual site visit allows students to get an idea of the as-is conditions on workplaces. Such digital representation can be used for virtual walkthrough on a 3D full-colour panoramic imaging. Instead of simply looking at photos, the participants will be given a full walk-through tour. It also allows interactive communication between participants and the site host with a live Q&A session.

D. Route to WLA

An on-demand consultation service for students, through online instant massagers or telephone hotlines, to provide information on WLA will be available. A set of WLA educational toolkit can be developed for students as well if necessary. A highlighted event is "【幫緊你 - HR睇CV】", in which students can receive a CV checking service by human resource professionals to increase the job-seeking opportunities as a career consultation career service.
Moreover, movie sharing can be provided with movies related to workplace culture. For example, the Intern, can be played in classrooms to inspire students. Reflection worksheets can be given to students for discussion. Alternatively, an extract of the movie can be played for students' discussion.

Example

Movie	The Intern
Questions	What was the culture shock? How did Ben Whittaker, a 70 years old intern, adapt to his new working environment? What was challenging to Ben Whittaker? Can you predict the culture shock that you may experience in the future?

E. Opportunity that Support:

Companies are offering more flexible remote work options than ever before. Placement opportunities can be located for students by the industry sectors to provide students with first-hand exposure to training plans. There is no limitation on the job preferences (i.e. remote, hybrid and on-site) and the current potential employers with an expressed interest include Taikoo Motors Group and Paul Y Engineering.
Additionally, role-play sessions can be introduced for students. Students will be assigned a role in related industries. A card that indicates the role and job nature will be given to each student. Students will then be asked to discuss about their expectations towards the job and what the reality could be. The facilitator will also discuss with the students. After the discussion, a scenario will be given to students. Students can be divided into groups and act out the scenario. Students can act different roles and discuss the situation. Jargon of the industry can be included in the task card. Also, some of the roles will be set as English or Putonghua speakers.

Example 1

Industry	Human Resources
Roles	Supervisor (Singaporean), Trainee
Scenario	The supervisor found that some personal data was left at the photocopier. *Supervisor:* You must handle personal data with care. *Trainee:* I did. *Supervisor:* If you did, why would I find this document at the photocopier. *Trainee:* I was about to take them back. *Supervisor:* Please make sure that you handle personal data with care. It is very important!! By the way, can you help adding papers into the photocopier? *Trainee:* Can I ask the attendant to do it? *Supervisor:* I am asking YOU to do it. *Trainee:* Alright. I will do it later. After 10 minutes, the supervisor found that the paper tray was still empty and the trainee was on Facebook. The supervisor did not really talk to the trainee afterwards. The trainee told everyone that there was nothing to do in the company.
Questions	Is this situation ideal? Why? How would you feel as the supervisor? How would you improve the situation?

Example 2

Industry		Construction
Roles		Engineer (British), Technical Assistant
Scenario		By the close of play, the Engineer found that the webs of a beam in a drawing were mistakenly marked. An amendment must be made before submission. *Engineer:* Could you please amend the webs in this drawing with 25mm instead of 35mm? *Technical Assistant:* Come on… it's Friday and I have to leave the office soon. *Engineer:* There is still some time. Perhaps you can have a quick look first? *Technical Assistant:* I'm about to go and I am packing my stuff now. *Engineer:* Please be aware that it's 4:30pm and our office hour is from 9am to 5pm!! By the way, please check if there are any discrepancies from the previous drawing? *Technical Assistant:* Alright. I will do it later. After 10 minutes, the Engineer found that the Technical Assistant left already and the drawing was still on the table. The Engineer did not really assign any tasks to the Technical Assistant afterwards. The Technical Assistant told everyone that he enjoyed much freedom in the company.
Questions		Is this situation ideal? Why? How would you express your difficulties with the Engineer in the situation? Can you suggest a better way to handle the situation?

V. PLAN-DO-CHECK-ACT (PDCA) FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE

The mapping of recommendations with apprentice skills wanted demonstrates that the quality of WLA is still emerging. Based on this mapping, the study identifies existing competence profiles for systematic professional development and good practice examples.

Recommendations	**Apprentice Skills Wanted**			
	AS1	**AS2**	**AS3**	**AS4**
Webinars to Inspire	✓	✓	✓	✓
Voice to You	✓			✓
Virtual Site Visit		✓	✓	
Route to WLA		✓		✓
Opportunity that Support	✓	✓	✓	✓

Moreover, this study was primarily interested in what expectations students have in workplace culture and how to bridge the gap, if any, between employers and students in a workplace setting. PDCA is a cycle that was originated by Shewhart et al (1986). Using the PDCA model is a useful tool for improving workplace culture.

A. PLAN

- Define goals so as to introduce different workplace culture, workplace conflicts handling skills and narrow the expectation gap between employers and students
- Confirm workplace culture inclusion is worth doing
- Sequence the activities including sharing sessions, the Capstone Game, role-play sessions and movie sharing
- Provide the activities details and suggest how to execute
- Prioritize with management and take approval
- Select pilot areas, scope of works and programme at TY campus
- Plan the budget, resources, responsibilities and analyse risks

- Allocate the resources and delegate working group members

B. DO

- Use control measures to reduce risks (cost, quality and schedule etc.) where necessary
- Lead by example and take part in the gemba walk
- Motivate students by gamification and incentives (e.g. souvenirs)
- Update students' skill matrix via observation, feedbacks and reflection worksheets and suggest training plan accordingly

C. CHECK

- Check the performance indicators of the project (cost, quality and schedule etc.)
- Review the activities and analyse what went good and what could have been better
- Check the needs of training plan and define areas of improvements
- Escalate the project to other campuses based on understandings

D. ACT

- Deploy the pilot project to other campuses
- Process standardization and set new targets if any
- Celebrate the achievements and appraise the working group
- Update responsibilities and facilitate the way forward

VI. CONCLUSION

The significance of workplace culture cannot be overstated, as it permeates every aspect of an organization. This study has shed light on the mismatch between employers' and students' expectations regarding workplace culture. In light of the previous recommendations, it is proposed to develop educational toolkits utilizing the Capstone Game and role-play sessions. This implication holds promising benefits for students, employers, and educators alike.

For students, the use of gamification can facilitate a better understanding of workplace cultures, alleviating anxiety and enabling smoother adaptation. Additionally, role-play sessions and movie sharing can equip students with essential workplace survival and problem-solving skills. Participation in these activities can also enhance their communication skills, including proficiency in English and Putonghua. Improved performance during workplace learning can ultimately make students more appealing to employers.

Employers, on the other hand, stand to benefit from this initiative as it provides a platform for them to articulate their views and expectations to students. This engagement fosters a positive company image and strengthens the relationship between employers and educational institutions.

For teaching staff, gaining a better understanding of the correspondences and discrepancies between employers and students enables strategic planning, consultation, training, and potential modifications to increase the inclusion and employability of students.

While these tips offer insights into assessing prospective company cultures during the job interview process, they are not exhaustive. It is important to note that job satisfaction encompasses various factors, and misjudging the company's environment should not deter individuals. Cleary students are encouraged to recognize that their careers are shaped by their own choices and agency.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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